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# ❖THE❖OLD❖TESTAMENT❖STUDENT.❖

VOL. V.

OCTOBER, 1885.

No. 2.

## THE MEANING OF SHEOL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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In the Revised Version of Gen. XXXVII., 35, the words of Jacob to his sons and his daughters, after Joseph's coat dipped in blood had been shown to him, are rendered, "I will go down to the grave to my son mourning," *Sheola* being translated *to the grave*. The Common Version reads, "I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning," --the only change made by the Revisers consisting in a substitution of *to* for *into* and *unto*. But they have inserted in the margin the following explanation of *the grave*: "Heb. *Sheol*, the name of the abode of the dead, answering to the Greek Hades, Acts II., 27." This explanation is correct and sufficient; but the necessity of making it, and of referring to it in subsequent passages, shows that the translation was not esteemed wholly satisfactory.

It is not, therefore, surprising that the same word has received other translations, after the manner of the Common Version. For instance, in the account of the overthrow of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (see Num. XVI., 30, 33) it is translated *the pit*, probably because this expression was supposed to agree with the form which was given to the judgment of God, viz., "The earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up . . . and so they . . . went down alive into the pit." But while retaining this translation, the Revisers have admitted the need of some explanation by inserting *Sheol* in the margin, yet without referring, as they should have done, to the passage in Genesis where this Hebrew word is explained by them as "the name of the abode of the dead." For how can the word *Sheol* shed light on the English expression, unless its meaning is known to the reader? And if it could be assumed that the English reader would know the meaning of *Sheol*, why should not that word have been put in the text, instead of the margin? Without a reference to Genesis XXXVII., 35, the marginal *Sheol* is practically useless to an English reader.

Indeed, we find such a reference in Isa. v., 14, where the word is translated *hell*; for the margin accompanies this third rendering by the following note: "Or, *the grave*, Heb. *Sheol*. See Gen. XXXVII., 35." With this note the reader, provided he consults the margin, and then examines the explanation in Genesis to which he is referred, will obtain a tolerably correct view of the meaning.

Briefly, then, the treatment of *Sheol* in the Revised Version is as follows: It is translated *the grave*, fifteen times (Gen. XXXVII., 35; XLII., 38; XLIV., 27, 31; 1 Sam. II., 6; 1 Kgs., II., 6, 9; Ps. CXLI., 7; Prov. XXX., 16; Eccl. IX., 10; Cant. VIII., 6; Isa. XXXVIII., 10, 18; Hos. XIII., 14); *the pit*, five times (Num. XVI., 30, 33; Deut. XXXII., 22; Ps. LV., 16; LXXXVI., 13); and *hell*, fifteen times (Isa. v., 14; XIV., 9, 11, 15; XXVIII., 15, 18; LVII., 9; Ezra XXXI., 15, 16, 17; XXXII., 21, 27; Amos IX., 2; Jonah II., 2; Hab. II., 5). It is also Anglicized as *Sheol* in twenty-nine places (2 Sam. XXII., 6; Job VII., 9; XI., 18; XIV., 13; XVII., 13, 16; XXI., 13, XXIV., 19; XXVI., 6; Ps. VI., 6; IX., 18; XVI., 10; XVIII., 6; XXX., 4; XXXI., 18; XLIX., 15, 16; LXXXIX., 49; CXVI., 3; CXXXIX., 8; Prov. I., 12; V., 5; VII., 27; IX., 18; XV., 11, 24; XXIII., 14; XXVII., 20). Thus it is translated in thirty-five places, and Anglicized in twenty-nine. And it is noticeable that all the passages in which it is Anglicized (including 2 Sam. XXII., 6 = Ps. XVIII., 6) are poetic. It is also noticeable that all the passages in which it is translated *hell* are in prophetic books (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Jonah, Habakkuk).

But is there any sufficient reason for this varied treatment of the word? We could answer this question in the affirmative, if there were evidence (1) that in the Hebrew language *Sheol* had more than one meaning—e. g., a primitive meaning and a derivative, or (2) that in the progress of religious knowledge among the Jews it exchanged one signification for another, or (3) that it always had a very indefinite, shadowy meaning, dependent on the context. Upon examination, however, we do not discover in the Old Testament use of the word evidence that it always had more than one signification, or that its later signification was different from its earlier. But there are indications that *Sheol* was used to denote a dim, obscure, unexplored region or state, and this circumstance seems to render the meaning of the word itself indefinite. Yet not in the sense of its being variable; the reality named was vague, obscure, but the name always meant that reality. This at least is the result of our present study of the passages cited above.

Why, then, have the Revisers retained three different renderings of the word, viz., *the grave*, *the pit*, and *hell*, while they have often

treated the Hebrew noun as a proper name? Possibly because the word is used in certain passages (e. g., in connection with the death of good men) where it cannot fairly be supposed to suggest any evil beyond that of being dead. In these it is translated *the grave*, as implying a state of death and referring to the abode of the dead. Again, because it is used in a few passages where the idea of physical descent, or of great depth, is involved in death or the manner of death. In these it is translated *the pit*—a rendering which probably agrees with the radical meaning of the Hebrew word, as well as with the physical sense of the English term *hell*. And, lastly, it is frequently used in speaking of the condition or abode of bad men after death, and then it is generally translated by the Revisers *hell*. But, apart from the teaching of the New Testament, these passages cannot be said to point with any clearness to spiritual suffering. *Sheol* is represented in some of them as vast, cavernous, unfilled. In it the dead are spoken of as asleep, or inert, or as deprived of the honor and power which they had in life (Isa. XIV., 9, 11, 15; Ezek. XXXI., 14-18; Amos IX., 2; Jonah II., 2; Hab. II., 5). We are unable to discover any valid reason for rendering the word *hell*, rather than *pit*, in these passages, or indeed any reason for translating it at all, which would not require its translation in many of the places where it is treated as a proper name.

The statement in the Preface to the Revised Version is as follows: "The Revisers, therefore, in the historical annotations have left the rendering 'the grave' or 'the pit' in the text, with a marginal note 'Heb. *Sheol*' to indicate that it does not signify 'the place of burial;' while in the poetical writings they have put most commonly '*Sheol*' in the text and 'the grave' in the margin. In Isaiah XIV., however, where 'hell' is used in more of its original sense, and is less liable to be misunderstood, and where any change in so familiar a passage which was not distinctly an improvement would be a decided loss, the Revisers have contented themselves with leaving 'hell' in the text, and have connected it with other passages by putting '*Sheol*' in the margin" (p. vii). The reasons here assigned for leaving the translation 'hell' in the text do not seem to us very cogent, and the neglect to allude in any way to the twelve other places in which the same translation is retained is remarkable. Probably, however, it was thought that the explanation of their course with Isaiah XIV. would be considered, without remark, as applicable to the other cases. But it would have been better to have represented the Hebrew word everywhere by *Sheol* or by *Hades*, its Greek equivalent. And certainly there would have been some gain to the ordinary reader, if the single name *Hades* had been always used.

Notwithstanding the criticism which we have ventured to make on the treatment of *Sheol* in the Revised Version, we desire to say that, as far as we have been able to examine that Version, it is a great improvement on the one in common use. Though more changes, wisely made, would have been welcome to many scholars, it was certainly better to err on the side of caution than on the side of rashness. And in spite of all the just or unjust criticism upon it, the Revision is a work of high and reverent scholarship, contributing every-where to a more correct view of the original text than could be obtained from the Common Version.

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## ORIGIN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT RELIGION.

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To the general scholar, as well as to the professional theologian, the religion of the Old Testament, when presented in its true light, cannot fail to prove profoundly interesting. There can be no question that, next to Christianity, with which it stands in organic unity, and of which it was the necessary preparation, it has been the mightiest spiritual power in the history of mankind. Its superior excellence is at once discerned when we compare it with the religions of nature, even in their best and purest forms. Where among them all can be found such exalted ideas of the one living, holy God; such a lofty view of the spiritual dignity of man; such a true insight into the nature of sin and holiness; such a pure morality; such a humane spirit; such sobriety, chasteness and spirituality of worship? These are features that immediately arrest the attention, and set this religion in the most marked contrast to heathenism, which, however attractive it may be in some of its aspects to the poetic mind, is yet marred by a gross polytheism, by a fantastic mythology, by a low and degrading conception of man, and not unfrequently by cruel and licentious rites.

Interesting as the religion of the Old Testament is in itself, it gains additional interest from its historical development. From the start it exhibited a vigorous and healthy life. As we trace it through its long career, we cannot but admire its constant progress upward from lower and cruder to higher and more spiritual forms. It at once entered into a bold conflict with falsehood under its various guises as they came successively to view—with the idolatrous nature-worship of the surrounding heathen nations, and with the unspiritual ideas of the chosen people themselves. A wonderful provi-